

VZCZCXRO3770
PP RUEHROV
DE RUEHTV #0351/01 0311504
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 311504Z JAN 07
FM AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9156
INFO RUEHXX/ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 TEL AVIV 000351

SIPDIS

SIPDIS
SENSITIVE

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [SCUL](#) [KISL](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: ISRAEL APPOINTS FIRST ARAB MUSLIM CABINET MINISTER

SUMMARY

1. (U) Fifty-eight years since the establishment of the state of Israel, the first Arab Muslim has been sworn in as a government minister (although currently without a portfolio). Labor MK Ghaleb Majadleh's controversial appointment was spearheaded by Labor party leader Amir Peretz, who most observers believe was looking for a way to bolster his chances of being reelected in Labor's upcoming primaries. Majadleh himself incurred considerable criticism from colleagues, both Arab and Jew, for his willingness to join a government that includes the anti-Arab Yisrael Beiteinu party, led by Avigdor Lieberman. End Summary.

MAJADLEH'S BIG CHANCE

2. (SBU) A former businessman and local labor union official, Ghaleb Majadleh first entered national politics as a Labor member of the 16th Knesset in 2004 and soon gained a degree of prominence as chairperson of the influential Interior Committee, at a time when Arab public support for the Labor party was dwindling. While party leader Amir Peretz' fortunes appeared to be on the rise, Labor made no move to curry favor with the Arab sector. In the aftermath of the Lebanon war, however, the prospect of Peretz winning the Labor primaries for a second time dimmed and the "Arab card" gained currency. A politically weakened Peretz began looking for a Muslim ministerial candidate to bolster Labor's image with the Arab electorate ahead of Labor's May 2007 leadership primaries.

SOME MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS...

3. (U) In January, Peretz picked Majadleh to replace Labor MK Ofer Pines-Paz, who resigned from the cabinet in protest over PM Olmert's inclusion of Yisrael Beiteinu in the governing coalition. Pines-Paz, a staunch advocate of equal opportunity for minorities and Peretz's rival for party leadership, claimed Peretz was cynically exploiting Majadleh to ensure his re-election in the May primaries. Pines-Paz has also been critical of Majadleh, who had been vocal in demanding that Labor quit the government when Yisrael Beiteinu joined the coalition in November. At the time, Majadleh went on record saying that Yisrael Beiteinu leader Avigdor Lieberman "wants a Jewish country with no Arabs, so we cannot legitimize him by sitting with him." But when the ministerial post was offered by Peretz, Majadleh performed reversed himself, arguing, "My appointment is an important precedent-setting step toward integrating the million Arabs in this country... Many have talked about equality but Peretz is the first to really take a step to bring it about..."

KEEP THE OPPOSITION WHERE YOU CAN SEE IT

14. (SBU) Amid the hue and cry over the perceived cynicism of the Peretz "maneuver" in picking Majadleh for the vacant ministerial portfolio and the failure of many Arab and Jewish politicians to grasp why Majadleh would agree to sit in the same government with Lieberman, it appears that few are crediting the new minister with the political savvy that has brought him this far. Of 24 current cabinet ministers, only Avigdor Lieberman voted against Majadleh's appointment. The Knesset confirmation vote was also decisively in favor (59 to 23 with 2 abstentions). Several Arab MKs, who were determined in their opposition to Majadleh's appointment, were nevertheless among the first to congratulate him, reflecting the complicated views Arab politicians hold of their participation in the government.

WITH HIS EYES ON THE PRIZE

15. (SBU) The lack of opportunity afforded to Arab politicians to exercise their skills at the government level may well have misled the pundits into underestimating just how adept they may prove to be if given the chance to "work the system." The first indications of Ghaleb Majadleh's expertise have already surfaced in a report that his swearing-in as a government minister coincided with the registration of some five thousand new Labor party members from the Arab sector. Questioned about the flurry of voter registration, Majadleh insisted that there was nothing irregular about it: "We want to be the largest section in the Labor party and influence the election of the party chairman," he told the mass-circulation newspaper Ma'ariv.

RAMON CONVICTION MAY DELAY CABINET RESHUFFLE

TEL AVIV 00000351 002 OF 002

16. (U) Majadleh remains a contender for the post of Minister of Science, Culture and Sport that he seeks -- the same ministry relinquished by Ofer Pines-Paz (and currently held by Education Minister Yuli Tamir) -- but this is also the same post that Lieberman wants for his Yisrael Beiteinu Party. While Majadleh has secured a seat at the cabinet table, the work on securing a ministry has just begun. Many observers had predicted that if former Kadima Justice Minister Chaim Ramon had been acquitted, PM Olmert would have used that occasion to reintegrate Ramon in the government and reshuffle other portfolios in the process. With the January 31 conviction of Ramon for "indecent acts," however, Olmert's incentive to reshuffle his cabinet has diminished.

17. (SBU) Bio Note: Majadleh hails from Baka el-Gharbia, an Israeli Arab town that borders the West Bank. It just happens to be one of the towns that Lieberman contemplates cutting off from Israel and including within a future Palestinian state. Majadleh is at home speaking Arabic and Hebrew, and speaks basic English as well. Like his Labor Party leader, Amir Peretz, Majadleh worked for the Histadrut labor union; both ministers graduated from high school, but do not have university degrees. Majadleh regularly complains to Embassy officers that more U.S. assistance to Israel should be channeled to the Arab minority population that represents his own political base.

JONES